

## **i need you now, like i needed you then by Iris Violetta**

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**Summary:** Nancy, Steve and Jonathan have been growing closer over the past few months. But with the biggest event of the year coming up, they can't keep merely dancing around each other.

## **i need you now, like i needed you then**

*1984*

I.

Jonathan knows something is up as soon as he sits down. They're at their usual table, in the far corner of the cafeteria where no one bothers them. But Steve and Nancy are acting funny, shooting each other glances loaded with meaning as the minutes tick by. Jonathan narrows his eyes at them.

"What's going on?"

"We - well, we wanted to ask you something.." Nancy flicks her eyes over to Steve, who smiles shyly.

"We were thinking that maybe we could all go to prom together, like as a group?"

"It was Steve's idea." Nancy adds.

Jonathan wrinkles his nose. "You guys are asking me to prom?"

"Yeah. Well, we'd say it's as friends but, you know..." Steve trails off and he and Nancy wait for Jonathan to say something.

He's not sure what to think at first. For one thing, school dances are not his thing. But over the past few months, the three of them have become practically inseparable. He'd say they were friends, but lately there's been another layer there, something close to the surface, threatening to come out. He finds himself stealing looks at both of them sometimes, and not the way he would look at a friend. And he's pretty sure they do it to him too. So maybe...maybe it's not a bad idea.

"Yeah. Let's do it."

Nancy claps her hands and Steve grins and they spend the rest of lunch eagerly making plans. Jonathan lets himself get swept up in the excitement. It's just prom. It'll be silly. It'll be fun.

## II.

The next week, the three of them sit at the same table, but everything is different. Steve is acting strange and Nancy is worried.

"Steve? What's going on?" She asks, but Jonathan already knows. He can see it in his shoulders, in his eyes fixed anywhere but them. When Steve speaks, he directs it to the table.

"I don't think prom is gonna work out."

"What?" Nancy asks, taking in a sharp breath.

"I think it should just be me and Nancy."

Nancy opens her mouth but nothing comes out. *What? What is happening?* She can see Jonathan retreating into himself, can see the flash of pain before he covers it with his carefully controlled mask.

"No, I get it. It's fine." Jonathan nods and gives a hollow laugh before rising from the table. "I gotta get some photos developed before class."

"Jonathan," Nancy softly says, but he ignores her. It's clear she doesn't know what to say anyway. As he walks to the darkroom he tries to quell the pain in his gut.

He's stupid, he's so stupid. Why did he ever think this would work out?

Back in the cafeteria, Nancy gapes at Steve incredulously. He won't look anywhere but the table.

"Steve, this whole thing was *your* idea. What happened?"

He shrugs. "Just changed my mind."

He doesn't mention how his dad came into his room last night. *I was talking to Tommy's dad this morning.* How his dad's eyes glinted steel. *Tommy's had some interesting things to say lately.* How he had to work to keep his face blank. *Didn't know you and the Byers boy were so close.* How he gave a noncommittal shrug, goosebumps rising on the back

of his neck. *Well, you know, with trash like that nothing good happens.* How his dad picked up a baseball from his desk and tossed it gently in his hand, looking at the ball but clearly directing his voice at his son. *We wouldn't want anything...unnatural happening.* How he gingerly placed the ball back on the desk before fixing Steve with threatening grin. *Would we?* How he meekly shook his head instead of saying what he really thought. *No sir.*

How his father *scared* him.

Nancy huffs when she realizes he won't say anymore. "I can't believe you."

He watches her back as she stalks out of the room. It's fine if they hate him for it. He hates himself.

III.

Steve lies on his bed, body tense and aching, staring at his clock as it strikes midnight. His conversation with Nancy and Jonathan last week won't leave his mind and his thoughts are an endless circle.

It's just a dance.

But it's not, it's not just prom, it's everything they haven't said yet, everything the three of them are inching toward but won't admit. And he's a fucking coward. Unable to handle his thoughts, Steve groans and stands from the bed. Maybe a late night drive will clear his mind and he can sleep.

The sky is starry and bright and the streets are empty. He slowly winds around the neighborhood, block after block, cigarette in his mouth. Turning on Maple Street, his heart clenches. The look in Nancy's eyes still burns. He glances up at her window as he drives past the Wheeler house but it's dark. Of course it is, it's the middle of the night. No one is out. *Well, not quite no one,* Steve thinks as he spots a familiar figure standing down the block. Mike Wheeler is looking at the moon and doesn't even seem surprised when Steve stops the car next to him.

"Hey. Can't sleep?"

Mike gives his head a tiny shake and hesitates before asking, "You?"

"Nah. Get in."

Steve thinks about saying something as they drive but he's never talked with Mike too much. Well, Mike doesn't talk to anyone much these days. Honestly, he's been looking a little dead-in-the-eyes for weeks now. After November, the boy had searched desperately for Eleven. But recently he's grown quiet and withdrawn. Nancy told Steve last month that she thinks Mike has accepted that the girl might be dead. He's going into grief.

Steve ends up taking them to the 24-hour diner, where the only other patrons are two middle-aged men sitting along the counter. They don't even look at the two boys when they walk in. Suddenly ravenous, Steve gets them a plate of fries to split. Mike only picks at it.

"So why can't you sleep?"

"Oh, uh... just prom drama. Stupid stuff." He's not about to get into the details with his girlfriend's little brother. Mike nods, looking down at the fry he's twiddling in his hand.

"I was gonna take her to the Snow Ball." The boy murmurs, so low that Steve almost doesn't hear but he does and his heart freezes. Mike drops the fry onto the plate. "I promised her."

Steve looks at him, feeling helpless and unsure of what to say. But mostly he just feels like a *dick*. Because here is Mike Wheeler, this scrawny middle schooler, whose world has darkened because his friend is lost or dead or - it doesn't matter, she's just *gone*. And the boy can't do anything about it.

He bites the inside of his cheek. It's time to stop being so scared.

IV.

The next afternoon Jonathan skips last period. He's been in a foul mood ever since that day with Steve. But of course, once he gets to the parking lot, a familiar BMW pulls up beside him.

"You skipping, too?"

Jonathan just shrugs. Steve nods his head toward the passenger seat.  
"Get in."

"I really gotta get going." He turns toward his car.

"Come on."

"Bye, Steve."

"Goddammit Byers!"

"What?" He snaps, spinning back around.

Steve speaks up again but it's barely a whisper this time. "Jon, get in the car."

Maybe it's the desperate look in his eyes or the strained note in his words but Jonathan gets in the car.

Steve drives them to the lake, pulling up to the water's edge. Jonathan knows why he brought them here. It was only a month ago that they spent a sunny Saturday here, when it was still chilly enough that no one else was around. They were free to laugh and talk as much as they pleased. He had taken a whole roll of film. And at the end of the afternoon, when they lay side by side on the picnic blanket, watching the clouds, Steve had softly, hesitantly, taken his hand and interlaced their fingers. And Jonathan let him; he even squeezed back. He was nervous and unsure but he was happy.

Now he isn't sure what to think.

"I'm sorry, Jonathan. I was stupid. I got...scared and I was stupid. Do you think - do you think we could all still go together?"

The other boy chews on his lip and stares out at the water. "No."

"No to prom? Or..." Steve doesn't know what to say but he knows he needs to say something. They have to talk about this...*thing*.

"It doesn't matter. It's just a stupid dance."

"That's bullshit and you know it. You know it's about more than that."

Jonathan feels a burning in his chest and he doesn't know what to say. He just wants to stop feeling so damn much. He can't be in here - it's too close, too tight. With a grunt he gets out of the car, but Steve is quick to follow.

"Hey. Hey! Talk to me."

Jonathan shakes his head, mouth open but silent. He knows what he wants to do, but it's insane, right? Insane.

Steve inches closer. "I want this. Don't you? Huh?"

Jonathan stares at him for a moment. *Fuck it.*

He takes a step forward and grabs Steve's face, crashing their lips together. Steve is shocked; he wasn't quite expecting *this*. But then he grips Jonathan's waist - so different from Nancy's, but just as enticing - and pushes him up against the trunk of the car. Jon's fingers are in his hair and their mouths are hungrily exploring each other and - *shit did he just moan* - and then they're falling. Wait, why are they falling?

They break apart when they hit the ground and when they look up they see the car has slid into the lake. Jonathan glances at Steve and for a moment the latter looks like he might cry, until he bursts out laughing. It's contagious and Jonathan grins too.

"You didn't put it in park?"

"I was a little distracted, okay?" Steve punches his arm.

"How pissed is your dad gonna be?"

"Doesn't matter. He'll always be pissed at me about something."

Jonathan knows what he means by that and when he helps Steve up he doesn't let go of his hand.

"So...prom?"

"Prom."

V.

They decide not to tell Nancy, to surprise her since prom is only a couple days away. That evening, as she teases her hair and picks out what necklace to wear, she tries to push away the melancholy feeling. Steve and Jonathan are talking again, but it's still not the same. She knows it's dumb, but the idea of prom with them both really meant something to her. It had felt important, like they were finally making a decision. She supposes they did make a decision in the end, just not the one she wanted.

It doesn't help that her eyes keep catching on the photos of Barb on her pinboard. She wonders what her friend would have worn to prom.

The doorbell rings and shortly her mom is calling for her. "Nancy, come down!"

*This is it. You'll be fine. You'll have fun.* She descends the stairs to find Steve standing in the entry looking dapper in his tuxedo. And Jonathan standing next to him in a suit, shyly smiling. She can't help the wide smile that spreads across her face, mirrored in Steve's own grin. She hugs them both tightly, not even caring that her mom is right there.

Both her boys. It feels right. Oh, it feels right.